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List 33

The photographs reproduced in this catalogue are (in this order)

Halifax (cover)
Late evening in the kitchen, 1936
A Billingsgate porter, 1932
Young housewife in Bethnal Green, 1937
Miners returning to daylight, 1933
Gypsy boy (Epsom Derby), 1933
Coal-miner's bath, Chester-le-Street, Durham, 1937
Parlourmaid preparing a bath, 1937
Bayswater houses lit by moonlight, 1942
Air-raid shelters in a Liverpool Street tube tunnel, 1940
Soho bedroom, 1939
Soho nightclub, 1939
Summer evening, 1933

Bill Brandt

early photographs 1930-1942

Arts Council of Great Britain

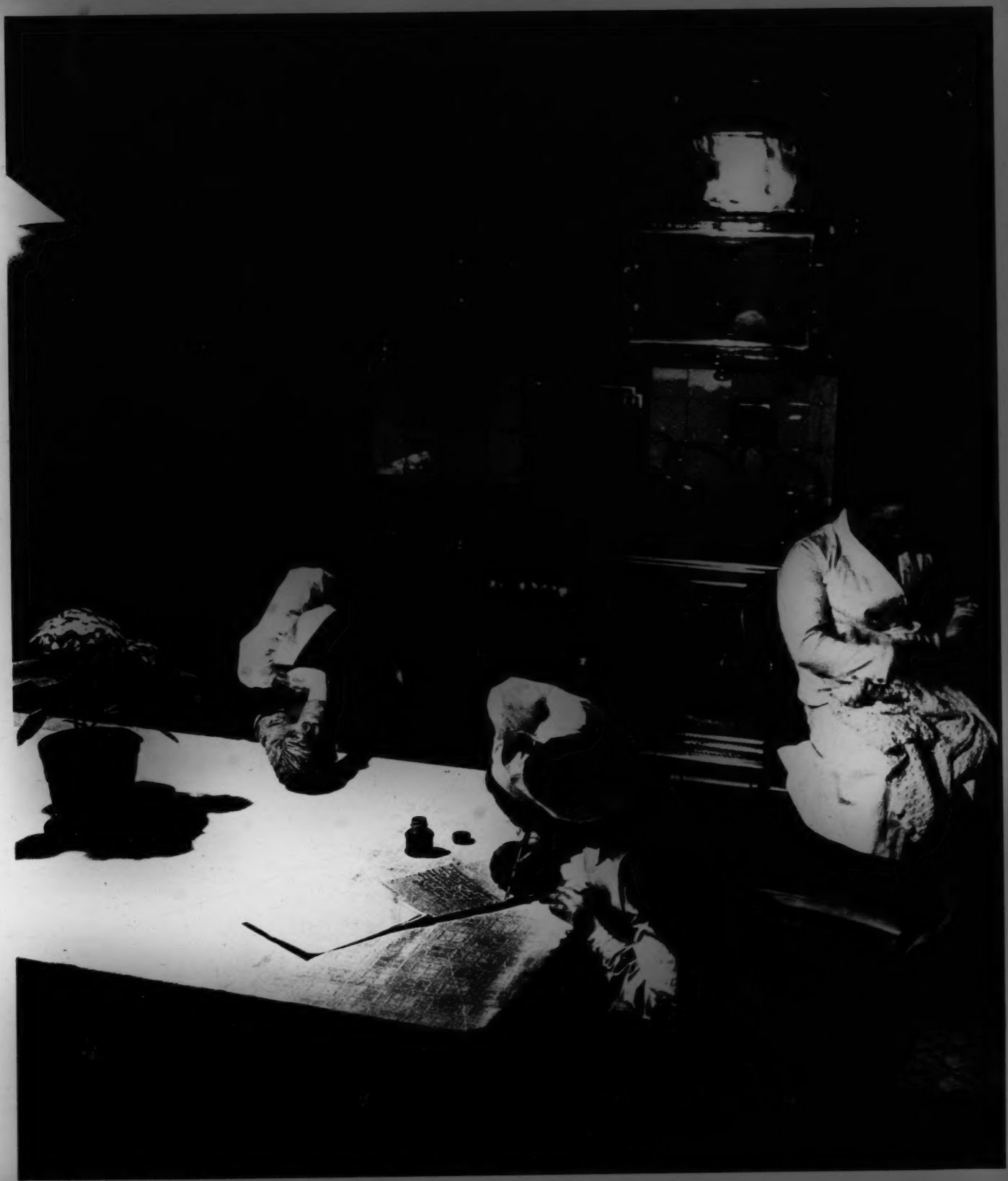
Foreword

It was appropriate that the first exhibition of photography presented by the Arts Council in 1970 should have been a major retrospective of the work of Bill Brandt. We are delighted now to be able to add this touring exhibition to our series of one-man shows devoted to the work of British photographers. The forty prints have been made for the exhibition by Mr Brandt and have been chosen from the early part of his career in England, when he was 'documenting' London and the North of England with a unique intellectual vigour and poetic sensibility.

We would like to thank Bill Brandt for co-operating with us to provide this important opportunity to penetrate more deeply into a relatively neglected period of his photography.

We are also grateful to Peter Turner, Assistant Editor of Creative Camera magazine, who selected the photographs for the exhibition and who contributes the essay that follows.

Joanna Drew
Director of Exhibitions



Bill Brandt—The Early Years

In common with all creative media, photography — or rather photographs — can be divided into three general groups. Those who are cornerstones in the construction of a visual tradition, those who contribute to and enlarge that tradition, and those who simply draw from it adding individual touches in an attempt to mark the work as their own. With a changing economic and cultural climate Britain, which so dominated the field in the 19th century has, during the past 70 years, produced few major figures who could be classified in the first group and certainly none equal in stature to Bill Brandt who is recognised internationally as an artist of singular importance. His vision has hung like a shadow, albeit a benevolent one, over a large part of the photographic spectrum for many years and his work — significant in the thirties — is more influential among young photographers today than almost any other single image-maker. Sometimes this influence is direct, more often it comes by way of other important photographers. Robert Frank for example, whose book 'The Americans' was a predominant force in shaping photography in the sixties has written of the importance of Brandt in his work. Ralph Gibson whose mysterious psychodramas are showing a similar effect in this decade has also talked of Brandt in this context. 'I am an instinctive, not an intellectual photographer' Brandt has said, and his instincts have led him to investigate a photography that has been continually innovative and stimulating.

Without doubt Bill Brandt exists among that handful of photographers who have truly changed our comprehension of the medium. His art is one of imposition, for his vision although inextricably linked with the apparent limitations of photography's mechanical origins, somehow transcends the potential bleakness of the camera image as an abstraction from life. To the perceived experience manifested in his photographs he lends a sub-surface drama — darkness and light struggle for co-existence while an often tense duality is explored that is at once a transcription of what was before the camera and a record of Brandt's inner vision. He is reticent in discussing his photographs but a phrase often repeated about a favourite image is 'dreamlike' and he has written 'We look at a thing and believe we have seen it. And yet what we see is often only what our prejudices tell us should be seen, or what our desires want to see. Very rarely are we able to free our minds of thoughts and emotions and just see for the simple pleasure of seeing. And as long as we fail to do this, so long will the essence of things be hidden from us.' These attitudes are valuable in considering Brandt's early work for what we see today is essentially a contemporary reinterpretation of pictures produced 30 and 40 years ago and although style and subject matter have changed radically in the intervening period there is a constancy to his vision and his understanding of the potential that photography offers.

Bill Brandt was born in 1904, the son of prosperous middle class parents who lived in South London. As a child he spent much of his time in Germany and later, suffering from tuberculosis, he moved to Switzerland. His ill health kept him from normal work and he decided to become a portrait photographer — an occupation regarded with mild suspicion by his family but, nevertheless, as suitable for one so delicate in constitution. Returning to London he began to photograph — not as he originally intended in a studio but on the streets, thus engaging a trend not to be fully realised until several years later. His first serious photographs were taken in the East End when Brandt, now aged 24, began to look beyond the sheltered environment that had surrounded him since childhood. The results were disappointing and a family friend introduced him to the American painter and photographer Man Ray who was supporting his own art by running a portrait studio in Paris. In 1929 Brandt moved to Paris to work as his pupil and assistant, a badly paid and tedious job that nevertheless gave him an entrée to a new and stimulating world.

Paris, centre of the avant-garde, was alive to the excitement of the Surrealists and the city was a hive of creative energy. Together with the poets, painters and film-makers who led the movement, photographers too were caught up in revolutionary fervour. Eugene Atget, the gentle and dedicated documentarian had died in 1927 and his work had just been discovered — the incongruity of his juxtapositions and the reflected fantasies that he found mirrored in shop windows were embraced as part of the surrealist liberation of art and this in turn meant a new acceptance and recognition for the medium. It was a heady and exhilarating experience for a young photographer, as well as Man Ray, Kertesz, Cartier-Bresson and Brassaï were working in Paris while surrealist magazines such as *Bifur*, *Variétes* and *Minotaure* were publishing photographs chosen for their poetic rather than their informational content. Film too was breaking new ground and Brandt remembers well the power of Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* and *Le Chien Andalou* and their subsequent effect on his photography.

Working with Man Ray channelled many influential forces in Brandt's direction — the work of Atget in particular, for although now dead he had lived just a few doors from Man Ray's studio and the two were well acquainted. Brandt was also naturally affected by Man Ray's own interests and he learned greatly from them. He had a new way of looking at the world. He saw everything differently. 'This gave me a new excitement about photography and about the world as well.' There were hundreds of books and prints that lay around the studio and these were objects of great fascination for Brandt. He tried to emulate his teacher, working with experimental darkroom processes, even attempting some nude photography, but the results were not successful. Speaking of his ex-pupil Man Ray said 'He came to my studio and asked if he could study with me. I said "I can't teach you anything. You watch me, and you help me too". He puddled around a bit and he finally became a photographer.' But despite Brandt's enthusiasm his relationship with Man Ray was strained and, finding the atmosphere unpleasant, he left the studio. He decided to stay on in Paris, earning a precarious living freelancing for *Paris Magazine*, and it was at this stage that his particular talents were first recognised when *Minotaure* — the most successful of the surrealist magazines — decided to publish his photographs.

In 1931 Brandt came back to England intending to combine portraiture and work for magazines. His return was timely for the concept of photo-reporting begun in Germany for the newly founded illustrated press, was beginning to penetrate this country. Abandoning his notions of portraiture, Brandt decided to concentrate on reportage and documentary photography, uniting with a growing social consciousness among artists, writers and intellectuals who were moved to respond to a depressed and defeated working class suffering greatly from the aftermath of the General Strike. As Surrealism had been added to Brandt's visual consciousness during his years in Paris, this move towards a new naturalism was to exert a profound effect over the next decade.

His first priority however was to become established as a professional photographer and he began working for the *News Chronicle*, illustrating a regular column written by a friend. This work was, though, only a background activity, for his major intent lay in recording the social contrasts that dominated the English way of life. Armed with the thought of producing a book he began to photograph, first in London where lavish mansions could be found within walking distance of slums, later in the suburbs and at social gatherings outside the city and finally in the industrial North. In comparison with those of his contemporaries Brandt's images were often surprising both in concept and content. Apolitical they were nevertheless coldly passionate and highly expressive — echoing the Surrealists emphasis on the unconscious response found in Brassaï's photographs of Parisian life. (Ironically, in 1938 Brandt was commissioned to produce a book *A Night in London* to parallel *Paris de Nuit* of 1933 by Brassaï.)

At first glance the images seem settled firmly in the documentary mode with which we have become so familiar – a frank, direct and unadorned scene that is a faithful mirror of reality. But subsequent viewing present a different, somewhat oblique picture that is explicit in content only. They become an enigma that, curiously, far from frustrating in their ambiguity are stimulating. From the ordinary Brandt sought to extract the extraordinary and in doing so he introduced a radical aesthetic far removed from that of his professional colleagues. His work *is* visually exciting in its directness and yet it resonates beyond what it is – spatially, compositionally, emotionally and, most importantly, tonally. It is the *surnaturel* of Victor Hugo, who spoke of that special reality that is normally hidden from view – in Brandt's shadows lurks the promise of another, far less familiar world to the one we believe we are seeing. I mentioned earlier his fondness for the 'dreamlike' quality of his pictures when time is transfixed in a moment of revelation. Writing on his own art the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte has described just such a sensation in 'Dreams which are not intended to make you sleep but to wake you up'.

As with many other facets of English life at this period, the mass communications media were in a state of rapid change – the most pertinent to the new non-studio bound photographers was the birth of pictorial journalism and the picture magazine. In 1934 *Weekly Illustrated* came into being, modelled on similar publications from Germany. The fresh perspective offered by this magazine interested Brandt as a natural outlet for his particular talent and he approached the editor, Maurice Cowen, with an offer to work for nothing as assistant to the art editor for the experience it offered. Cowen was not impressed by the young photographer, but as it cost nothing Brandt was taken on. He quickly learned the mechanics of magazine production and began to freelance for them as a photographer. He was however, still concerned to produce his book and reading *An English Journey* by J. B. Priestley made him decide to visit the industrial North. Unlike all his later work there was no commission attached to this assignment and Brandt explored Sheffield, Halifax, the Potteries and Teesside, searching for images that corresponded with those he found in London.

After great difficulty in finding a publisher, *The English at Home* finally appeared in 1936, just prior to George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* which had been compiled over the same period. That Brandt was part of a movement and not the isolated voice that is often supposed is clearly shown in comparing the two works, for while Orwell dealt with only the miner's life, he speaks of an attitude almost exactly mirrored in *The English at Home*. The delicacy of movement of the young housewife in Bethnal Green cleaning the steps of her dark overshadowed house and the contrast between this and her expression was seen by Orwell from a train leaving a Northern town. 'At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones . . . I had time to see everything about her – her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five . . . and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that "It isn't the same for them as it would be for us", and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her – understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold . . .'

In the years following the appearance of his book, Brandt continued to work in the expanding magazine field and his pictures appeared in *Picture Post*, *Lilliput* and *Bazaar*. With a comparative dearth of skilled and sensitive photographers, work was not hard to find and in 1938 his second book was published. *A Night in London* was co-published in France by Arts et Métiers Graphiques who organised Brandt's first one-man show, held in Paris.

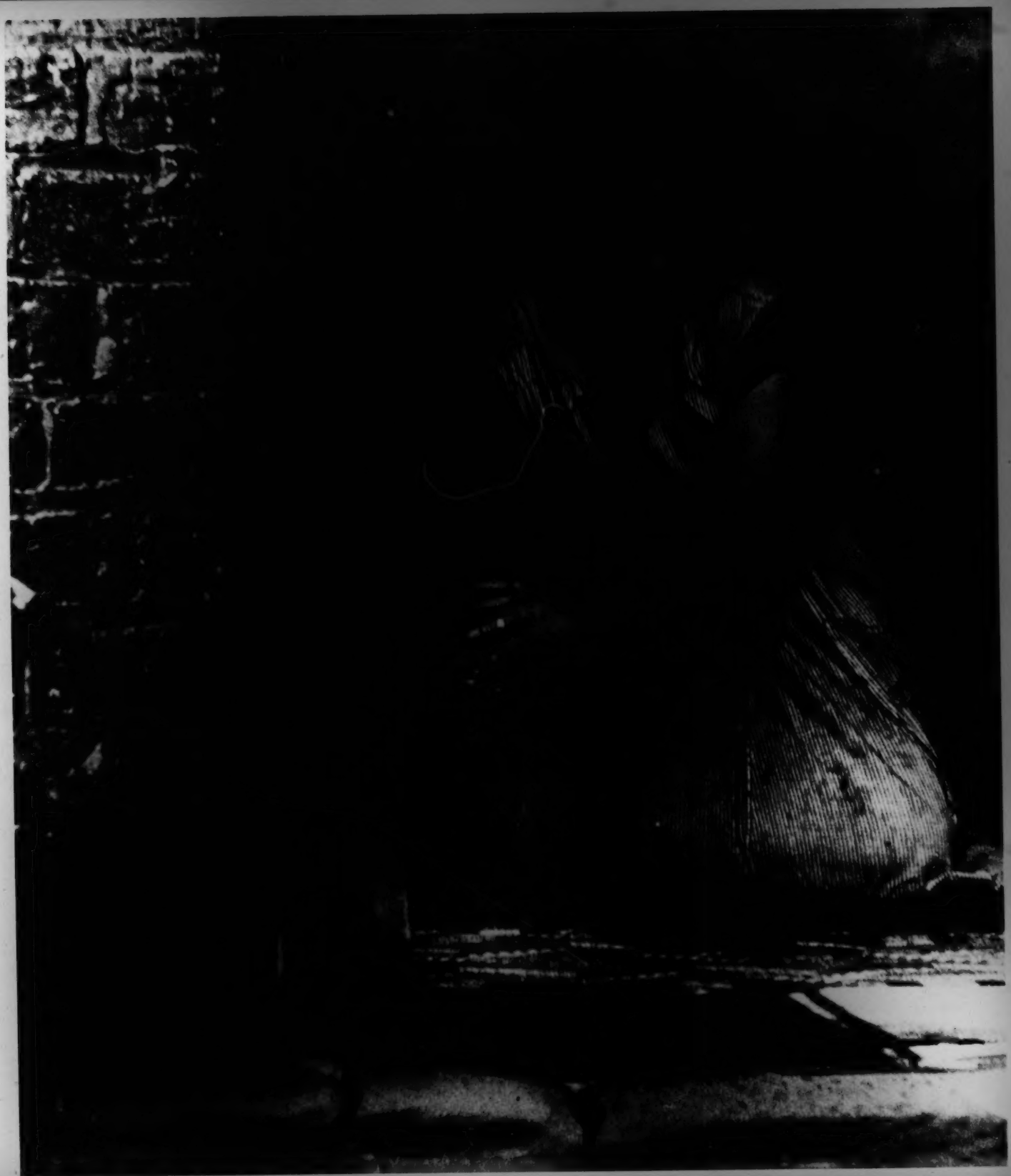
The outbreak of war brought changes in his career as he become involved in work for the Home Office and the National Buildings Record who required photographs of important buildings to enable an accurate reconstruction to be made in the event of their destruction. For the Home Office he was asked to provide a survey of underground bomb shelters and the strange subterranean refuges provided more opportunities for Brandt to explore the extensions of the social document that so characterises this period of his photography. A selection of these pictures were published by *Lilliput* together with Henry Moore's shelter drawings. Brandt worked much for *Lilliput* during the war – the editor Tom Hopkinson had previously been associated with *Weekly Illustrated* and was now also editor of *Picture Post*, and it was he who commissioned the striking and often beautiful *London by Moonlight* series of buildings in the blackout.

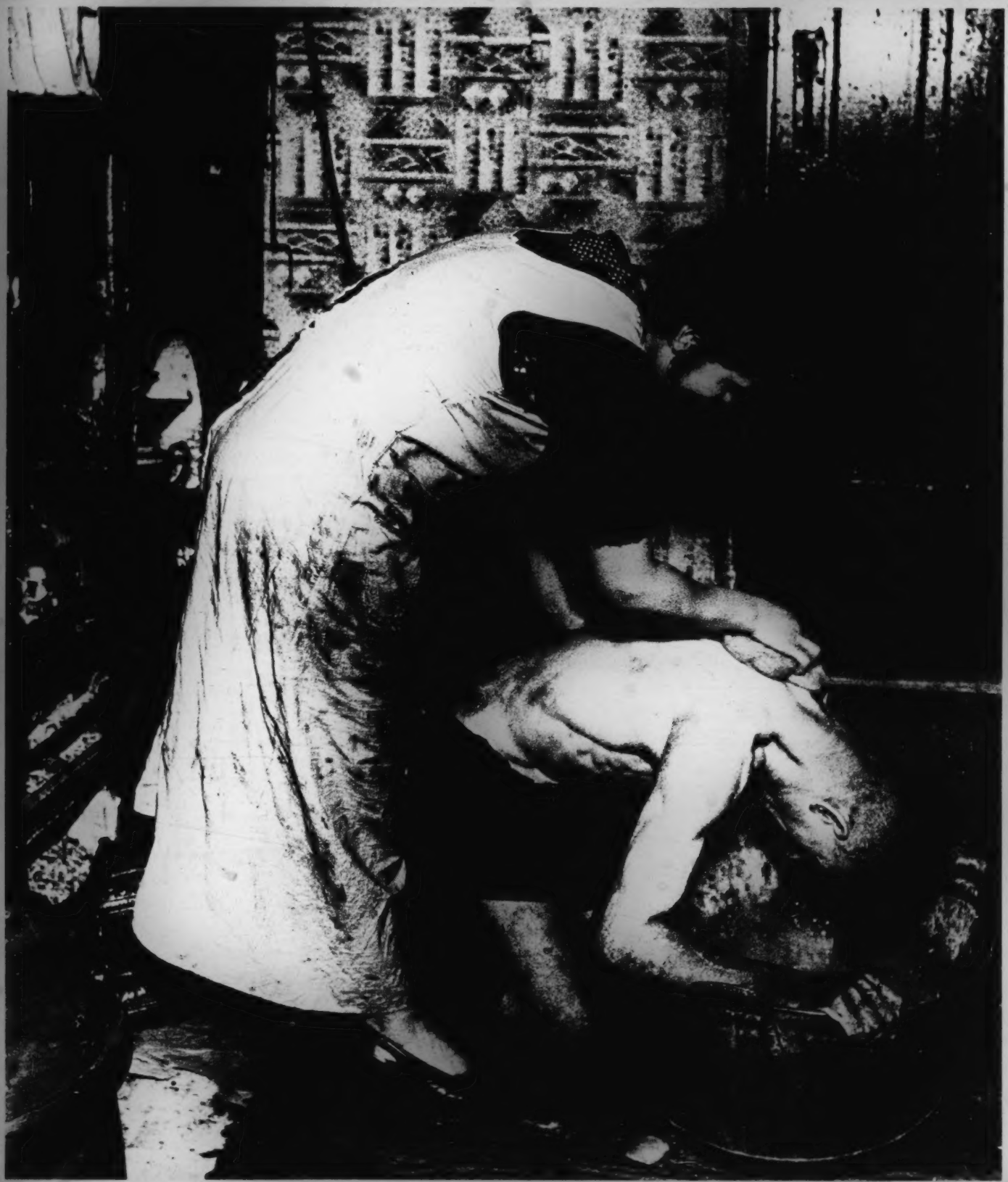
As the war drew to a close, Brandt's enthusiasm for reportage began to dwindle. 'Documentary photography had become fashionable. Everybody was doing it. Besides, my main theme of the past few years had disappeared. England was no longer a country of marked social contrast.' Instead his mind returned to the trends that had so excited him while in Paris and his work took on a more overtly poetic tone that, over the following twenty years, was to manifest itself in landscapes, portraits, nudes and abstracts.

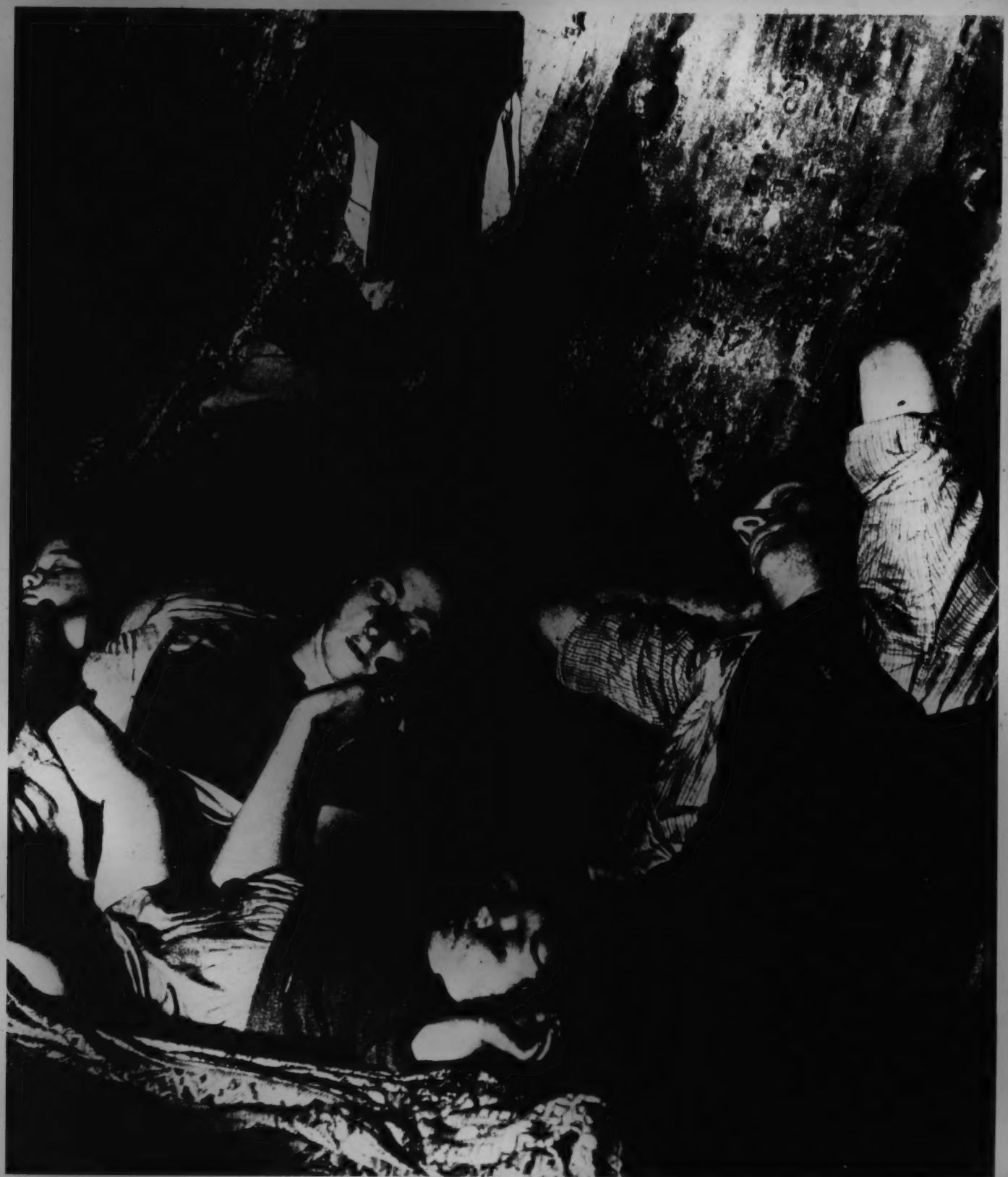
Of all Brandt's work it is probably the nudes that have gained the greatest acclaim. Writing on the occasion of his Museum of Modern Art show in New York, John Szarkowski said 'In photography only Edward Weston has made nudes of equal power'. During the period from the end of the war until the early 1950s Brandt had begun to use his camera to explore the possibilities of new spatial concepts that had their beginning in his '30s photographs of Northern industrial towns and the *London by Night* series. Working in landscapes to create an atmosphere 'that charged the commonplace with beauty' he made images with a sense of structure that was both visually dynamic and evocative of his subject, but the advent of his nudes and their complete dislocation from our understanding of 'normal' time and space elements was a major breakthrough that Brandt considers the climax of his career. With the aid of an ancient wide-angle camera that changed his vision from that of a man to one more like 'a mouse, a fish or a fly', he began to use perspective in a totally new way – no longer was it a simple delineation of space but rather a tool for experiencing form in a pure sense, akin to a two-dimensional sculpture.

In some respects the status that Bill Brandt now enjoys is at odds with convention for his photographs – cropped and manipulated – are the exact antithesis of those held in such esteem by 'pure' photographers whose attitudes predominate in the photographic community. Yet if Brandt's prints do not correspond to the external signs of alliance with the mainstream of photographic thought, his vision remains as a direct connection with this consciousness. 'See the subject first. Do not try to force it to be a picture of this, that or the other thing. Stand apart from it. Then something will happen. The subject will reveal itself'. In person too he seems removed from the popular public conception of a photographer – quiet, dignified and unassertive, more like a scholar than a forceful and compelling image-maker. But Brandt has little time for fashionable attitudes to ways of seeing. 'Photographers should follow their own judgement and not the fads and dictates of others. Photography is still a very new medium and everything is allowed . . . to achieve his best work the young photographer must discover what really excites him visually. He must discover his own world'.

Peter Turner, 1975







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